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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 005570

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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE CLIMATE  
OF FEAR

REF: BANGKOK 05435 (INSIDE THE ARMY'S RAID OPERATIONS)

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Classified By: Political Counselor Susan M. Suttton. Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. Summary: Discussions with public administrators and civil society leaders in the deep south revealed recurring themes of continued fear, ambivalence about the effectiveness of the security forces aggressive arrest tactics, and the need for political space to resolve the conflict. Several contacts spoke of a sophisticated organization behind the insurgency, but none had specific information to back-up their claims. Academics at both Prince of Songkhla University and Yala Islamic University worried about the lack of education and opportunity for young people. End Summary

¶2. (C) Poloffs traveled to the deep south provinces of Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani on October 1-2 to discuss the ongoing separatist violence in these provinces with a diverse group of local contacts. Meetings focused on the effectiveness of security forces aggressive arrest tactics instituted in June 2007, and their impact on the level of violence and security. (Note: In June, 2007, Thai security forces adopted a new tactic where specific villages are targeted by security forces and everyone suspected of being involved in any way with the insurgency is detained. To date, some 600 people have been arrested in these operations. According to Martial Law and the Emergency Decree, those detained can be held up to a maximum of 37 days without being charged with a crime. The military, however, has been offering detainees an option of attending reeducation camps for four months of occupational training instead of being charged. This program, modeled on the anti-Communist campaign of the 1970s and 1980s, has been controversial. Supporters argue that it has reduced levels of violence in the south; opponents say it is too harsh and may create a backlash eventually. End note.)

Voice of the Local Government

¶3. (C) Phisa Thongloet, Vice Governor of Narathiwat province, does not believe there has been a perceptible change in the level of violence in Narathiwat province since the security

forces adopted more aggressive arrest tactics in June, 2007. The level of violence is still very high, and the same kinds of people are still being targeted. Phisan was cynical of any government initiative being able to impact the situation.

According to Phisan, regardless of any new policy the government implements, or how it adjusts to the situation, the violence will continue. Phisan believes people in the south have grown accustomed to the violence and will continue going about their daily lives. When pressed to elaborate, Phisan did acknowledge some recent changes in the security situation. He said for him, the most notable change is the lack of local protests when police go into a village and make arrests. He believes this is because people in the south understand what the security services are doing, and need peace. He said villagers are being more cooperative and giving the authorities more information. He also said there appeared to be less collateral damage associated with the violence--fewer innocent by-standers were being caught in the attacks.

14. (C) Violence aside, Phisan said after six years working in Narathiwat, living standards have gotten better but the economy is still not good. There is no major investment because of the violence and the government continues to have a hard time running development projects because officials cannot travel to local project areas. According to Phisan, development projects are funded and approved through the SBPAC (Southern Border Province Administrative Center). Although the SBPAC runs its own "special projects", local governments are free to propose projects as well, with the ultimate funding decision made in the SBPAC. Phisan was vague about the projects SBPAC was funding, and said only that the projects involved cultural and educational development work. Speaking about reports of migration out of the extreme south, Phisan seemed to dismiss them and said those that do travel north to Songkhla go there so their kids will get a better

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education, not to leave. Often, they send their kids up there, but still work and live in Narathiwat.

#### Opinion of the Local Islamic Committee

15. (C) Chairman of the Narathiwat Islamic Committee, Hajji Abdul Rozaz Ali echoed many of the points made by the Vice Governor of Narathiwat. He was ambivalent as to whether conditions were improving with the change in security forces tactics: things are getting better...a state of fear remains...people are getting used to the violence. Abdul asserted that cooperation with government officials is increasing and that the violence is more limited because attacks are no longer random, but aimed at specific targets. When asked about arrests, he said people are cooperating with the government on this, but yes, people and the government still have conflicting views. According to Abdul, 80 percent of those arrested are legitimate suspects, and maybe 20 percent should not have been arrested. The big issue is when people do something wrong (illegal) they must pay the price, but so must officials who do something wrong. As a further concern, he added, "if there is no injustice, the militants will create it..."

16. (C) Abdul asserted Muslims leaders know who the village level militants are, and admitted that the Islamic Council helps to identify them. Local leaders also know who the insurgents in their areas are, but don't know the identities of the master minds. People understand that the arrests won't be perfect and they petition the Islamic Committee if they feel they have been persecuted unjustly. According to Abdul, there have been no such petitions in the past 4-5 months, but there have been reports of dissatisfaction with the military raids, including complaints about the excessive use of force. He said those arrested are allowed to have visitors but those charged with crimes don't have the same visitation rights. "Real militants" may not receive visitors. According to Abdul, out of 100 arrests maybe 10

get prosecuted. The biggest challenge to winning over the people is adjusting arrest operations. Security services must immediately release those found innocent--they should not detain them.

¶17. (C) Abdul described the role the Islamic Committees are playing, asserting "we have direct cooperation with the authorities." Before Security forces make arrests, they sometimes request us to talk to alleged suspects, mostly religious instructors, in an attempt to win them over. If they agree to stop their anti-government activities, or effectively deny involvement in militant activities, there is no arrest. But for the real suspects, there is no compromise and they will be arrested. He said there are two groups of militants, drug addicts and those who are recruited and indoctrinated by teachers. Provincial Islamic leaders and city people understand the arrests, but village people do not. Abdul has not felt comfortable or completely safe for a while. He said he tries to be impartial and seen as mediator, but it is difficult.

¶18. (C) When asked about issues driving the violence, he commented on the split between "development and justice." He said this is the big issue driving the violence. We want education and development, but injustice remains a major problem as well. The SBPAC--which Abdul serves as an adviser to--is "like a well-intentioned blind man." It is too bureaucratic, slow. Not effective. It's not that the people are bad, but that the system is. When asked if national elections scheduled for later this year may have an impact on the South, he laughed and said that the two issues are "not connected." Commenting on Buddhist-Muslim relations, he said they are not good, but this dynamic is not as bad as the lack of trust and suspicion within the ethnic-Malay Muslim community. People are scared of each other. Abdul admitted when he drives around, he is relieved when it is a (obviously) Buddhist man and not an ethnic-Malay Muslim man, driving beside or behind him. Distrust is strong, but it has not taken the form of revenge. According to Abdul, religious life in Narathiwat has not changed for the Muslims of this

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province. People are not more religious because of the violence, people were already devout.

Academia Weighs In

¶19. (C) Poloff contact Dr. Srisomphop Chitphiromsi of Prince of Songkhla University said his statistics indicate the violence was down in July, after the security forces adopted the new tactics, but back up in August. He believes some of the arrests are good, but the militants have a very competent organization--so the arrests don't end the violence in the area or keep the militants out. Srisomphop said there are no protests because the villagers know that those arrested are involved in the violence. Violence continues because those arrested are primarily from the "political wing" of the insurgency. People know who they are so they are more likely to be wrapped-up. The operational elements are not well known. The insurgents have a parallel political organization within the province. (Note: Srisomphop was not able to elaborate on his comments regarding the structure of the militant groups, their political organization, or political agenda. End note.)

¶10. (C) On the current state of the insurgency, Srisomphop estimates only 8-10 percent of the population support it, but more talk in private about autonomy or some special political status for the south. According to Srisomphop, the Wahabists are strong in the South, but not tied to the violence and, in fact, are being targeted by the insurgents. He said there have been 2 or 3 bombs found outside of Yala Islamic University. As for Islamic students at Prince of Songkhla University, he thinks they are, in general, becoming more moderate. As an example, he spoke of a Muslim student leader who resigned his leadership position when pressed by

militants to work for them.

¶11. (C) Srisomphop said a bigger issue for him was the 100-200 thousand kids outside of the "system" and without opportunities or education. These kids represent a "ticking time bomb." At his school, Srisomphop said 800 of 1200 freshman failed English. These kids are not into social activities any more and are more politically active. He thinks there are probably militant cells on his campus. The government needs some comprehensive plan or package to deal with this issue. According to Srisomphop, the government spent 30 billion baht in last couple of years on South, but only some 8 billion goes to people for development. The rest is for security.

#### View from the Trenches

¶12. (C) According to Dr. Petchdao Tomina, things are "not better, not worse." People are still scared. Petchdao, a former member of the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) and director of a mental health center responsible for the three southern provinces, said the tactics of the security forces are not working, and the government is alienating the population. Petchdao, who runs mobile health clinics in the villages, said stress levels in the villages are very high, and illnesses such as post traumatic stress disorder are taking a heavy toll. When the head of a family is caught up in an operation and detained, the family loses its livelihood and the ability to feed and take care of itself. This is breeding resentment and causing real hardship. Although the security forces claim families are allowed to visit detained family members, the families are not always allowed access. This is especially difficult when families have traveled long distances for visits. Petchdao believes there is currently no middle ground in the conflict. The SBPAC is not capable of addressing the issues, the Islamic committees are too weak, and traditional village leaders are too afraid.

#### The Conservative Cleric

¶13. (C) Dr. Sukri Langpu-te, Dean of Political Science at Yala Islamic University (formerly Collage), spoke mostly of his institutions, initiatives to broaden its curriculum so that the Muslim residents of southern Thailand would be able

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to take advantage of opportunities in business and government. He lamented the lack of southerners in public administration positions in the south, and blamed this on the phondok system of education which left students woefully unprepared for life after graduation. He spoke at length about adding a peace studies curriculum. When asked specifically about the current situation in the south, he too spoke of a lack of middle ground. In the past, when Thaksin was in power, there was no room for middle ground because the government declared people were either with the government or against it. There was little room left to maneuver between the extremes of the militants and the government security efforts. The government considered anyone not siding with a militant. Traditional leaders became afraid and withdrew, causing a huge problem. Now there is no dialogue, so no one can understand what the militants want. According to Sukri, 90 percent of the people are not with the separatists. The government, however, has not won them back either.

¶14. (C) Comment: Our meeting with Sukri did little to dispel the enigmatic nature of his institution. Dr. Sukri's comments regarding the nature of the schools curriculum was moderate, almost secular rhetoric. We plan further contact with Dr. Sukri for a better understanding of the changes that may be taking place at Yala Islamic University, and the role the institution is playing in the south.

¶14. (C) Comment continued: This diverse group of contacts provided a surprisingly consistent view of the situation in

the southern Thailand. Most seemed ambivalent about the efficacy of the security forces tactics, but agreed about the potential of the tactics to back-fire should the security operation not have a component aimed at social justice and political reconciliation. There also appeared to be some agreement that security forces were receiving better cooperation on the local level, noting the general lack of protests when suspects are arrested. They also consistently felt that the local population was not necessarily behind the insurgents, but reckless government tactics could force them in that direction. Should our contacts be correct in their assertion that the identities of the militants are known to village leaders, the arrest operations should yield some clues regarding the nature, structure, and leadership of the organization behind the violence.

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